

SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA

if her desire was not fulfilled, God and St. Dominic would take her from the world, they told Lapa they would grant her daughter's request, provided the girl was not too beautiful. Their representatives being reassured upon this point (for she was temporarily, but completely, disfigured by her illness), and immensely edified by her conversation, they accepted her as a sister ; and, on her recovery to health, she received the habit from one of the Dominican friars who acted as director of the sisterhood at San Domenico in the Cappella delle Volte—that little chapel still so fragrant with her spirit. There is some small difference of opinion as to the date of her thus taking the habit, but I think it was most probably about the beginning of 1363.

Then began that wonderful life of almost incredible austerity and of mystical communings with the unseen, that made the whole existence of this young maiden of the people seem a new, unheard-of miracle. As far as the austerities were concerned, however, she was only continuing what she had already begun as soon as her family had granted her her liberty.

Gradually abstaining from one thing after another, Catherine freed herself from all dependence on food or sleep. In a short while, she could easily restrict herself to raw herbs, a little bread, and water. Then the bread was left out, and she ate only the herbs. Soon even that became a torment to her, and she seems often for a long time to have lived upon the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar alone. " In the time during which I was allowed to be the witness of her life," writes Fra Raimondo, ^{c<} she lived without any nourishment of food or drink ; aided by no natural power, she ever sustained, with a joyous countenance, pains and labours that would have been insupportable to others." In these kter years she would usually, to avoid scandal (for while these things seemed miracles to Fra Raimondo and his friends, others, of no less repute in the spiritual life, cried out against them), sip a little water and force herself to chew some coarse food, but always with great physical suffering.¹ She slept on a bare board. At first

¹ On one occasion, to avoid singularity, she appears to have asked the Pope to impose a rigid fast of bread and water upon her, as a condition of gaining an